

Book Review:

Pedagogy of the Oppressed,

Freire, P. 2005

New York: Continuum.

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Drawing parallels between Freire's work and EJOLTS' processes and values.

Moira Laidlaw

Open University, UK

I first read 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' during my M.Ed. course at Bath University at the end of the 1980s. I had spent ten years in an English secondary school classroom and felt the need to delve more into the values underpinning and motivating what I was doing. Freire's book fascinated me, but I wasn't ready for his ideas then. His text is highly political and I foolishly prided myself on keeping out of politics, which I saw as merely party-focused (Laidlaw, 2015). I entirely omitted the social context from the equations of teaching and learning, so that Freire's work struck me on first reading as out on an extreme limb. I didn't realise that was where I was. However, extremism is a sliding scale and dependent on where someone draws the spectrum, where they start and finish. Once I began, through my six years in China from 2001 to 2007, to recognise the political ramifications of everything I was doing there, and being alarmed at the inequities I was now seeing everywhere, both in China and later back in the UK, I realised that Freire had far more to say than I had understood at first and that I needed to read his work. I had a lot to learn.

Freire's book is fresh to me, every time I read it – and I have enjoyed it many times in the last 10 years. It deals with the necessity of making the unconscious, the systemic, the structural, political and social aspects of human existence conscious. Throughout the process this will include for example, the democratisation of creativity and enterprise, with the drive towards the equalisation of opportunities for all, with a raising of critical consciousness and a deeper understanding. I think what most attracts me to this book is its unique insight into the connections to be made between hope for

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the flourishing of humanity and the social contexts in which the work needs to take place.

In 2015 I wrote an article for EJOLTS (Laidlaw, 2015) with this book as its central text. I realised that I needed to continue a process of conscientisation, which Freire sees as necessary to good practice, and that I wasn't doing enough. I wrote about Freire making it clear that only through the recognition of liberating both the oppressed and oppressor through dialogue can human groups be truly able to create systems that are human-friendly and, in the language of Living Theory, reveal the values that, 'carry hope for the future of humanity, such as love, freedom, justice, compassion, courage, care and democracy' (see <http://ejolts.net/about>). Without this equalisation of power within the relationships engendered in the names of social justice, education, equality, hope for humankind – or whatever it is that we do what we do because of the why – then no genuine, deep, enduring and positive change is possible. And here I could be just as easily writing about Freire's book, or the work that I have been involved in with EJOLTS since 2008. The two have remarkable points of connection and emersion.

This seminal text shows us the necessity for people to engage in dialogues specifically about how power between them can be equalised for the social and individual good. That standing on one's acquired power, however benignly acquired, must not be allowed to interfere with the acts of negotiation for the greater good. Only when individuals stand together, equal as they are, can any social movement be likely to succeed, and become sustainable and generative. Freire's insights seem to me to have a lot to say to Living Theorists and other people involved in EJOLTS, when it comes to the recent discussions of Living Theory as a social movement (Briganti, 2015).

I see a connection between Freire's text and the articles and processes of this journal. A key factor illustrating this is the work of the EJOLTS editorial team, the reviewers and authors as we seek to live out the values of democratic practice for the flourishing of humanity. In the EJOLTS reviewing process an author is encouraged to choose one of their three reviewers, and the whole process is carried out on a publically-accessible forum (see <http://ejolts.org/mod/forum/view.php?id=5> for details). As author and reviewers become clearer, i.e. more conscientised, to what it is that the author wishes to bring to the readers' attention, the more, it is hoped, that all parties will learn something of value. It would seem that the very value of democratic practice underpinning the process can contribute to the quality of its learning, a tenet I have developed with others over time throughout my years as a Living Theorist (Laidlaw, 1994; 2015). The quality of democracy is something the editorial board continues to discuss on a weekly basis, as authors and reviewers freely discuss their work from day to day and from week to week.

Freire sees the relationship that individuals and groups create democratically within community as pivotal to the success of any legitimate efforts towards freedom, which he sees as a fundamental goal for human agency. It is not to be confused with license, however. He sees freedom as the result of praxis — an informed action — in which an equalisation between theory and practice is achieved. It is necessarily hard won:

[It] is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. (p. 47)

I believe there are parallels between the editorial team's desire at EJOLTS to democratise its publication processes and Freire's notion of hard-won freedoms through which to liberate consciousness and agency in groups. Both of these are political processes in the sense that power plays a part in determining what is valid and what constitutes truth. Both focus on building consensus through rigorous and accountable processes of interaction, such that the transparency of the processes becomes one of the standards of judgement to which their success or otherwise can bear witness.

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